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ABSTRACT

A required reading course for first-year English majors at Hokusei Junior College (Japan) is described. The course is intended to teach students to survey a text, read through it, form an opinion about its content, and skim portions that are less important. At the same time, students are encouraged to guess at the meaning of unknown vocabulary, relying on a dictionary only when necessary for accurate and detailed understanding of the text's content. A commercially-available reading text series is used, supplemented with some other texts. In class, students formulate questions about aspects of the stories and work alone or with others to answer them in writing. Exercises to wean students from dictionary use are introduced early in the first semester. They involve discussion of word context and use, and are later broadened to include synonyms. Another activity in the first semester is extracting specific information in texts and connecting it with the context of the world outside the classroom. Text assignments become longer as the semester proceeds, and students begin to engage in discussions of opinion concerning the text. In grading assignments, clarity, comprehension, and new ideas are valued alongside quality of writing. (MSE)

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Teaching reading to first year college English majors

Torkil Christensen

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Teaching reading to first year college English majors

Torkil Christensen

Abstract

This is a report of a reading course for first year college students. The classes, with about 50 students, meet twice a week for 45 minutes. The course aims to help students deal with larger amounts of reading than they have been used to so far, and uses extensive individualization in the homework assignments.

要　約

これは、短大の第一年目学生のためのreading courseの教授方法である。このクラスには、約50名の学生がおり、一週間に二回、45分の講義がある。このcourseの目的は、学生が、これまで馴染んできたよりもさらに多量の文章を読みこなすことができるようにすることであり、課題をあたえるときに広範な個別指導をおこなう。

Introduction

This paper follows a similar one written last year and offers further suggestions for the teaching of reading to first year college students. The focus of the activities and suggestions in this paper especially relate to reading volume and speed.

The ideas have been developed and are used in a course in speed reading I have been teaching for some years. The course is a required course for freshmen at Hokusei Junior College, and is one of

several reading centered courses that aim to provide the first year students with reading skills beyond what has been necessary in high school.

Some of the aspects of the reading ability and performance of the students at the start of the course were described in detail the previous paper (Torkil Christensen: *Teaching Reading to High School Graduates in Japan*. Bulletin of Hokusei Womens' Junior College Vol 27, 1991), and may be summarized as:

An inability to react to text other than by putting it into Japanese. This means that students will not look at a text before reading, but rather begin putting it into Japanese from sentence one, without attempting to gain an overview of the story (text), its topic, length, purpose, level of difficulty, or other aspect, before starting to put it into Japanese.

Students are also very unsure of what they read. They have taken numerous multiple choice tests without feedback other than the total score of the tests, and have little confidence in the accurateness of the Japanese that they use to rephrase the English texts into.

They have read very small volumes in very great detail, and a text of perhaps 500 words is considered long. Further, they have always read assigned texts, and no room has been left for them to choose what they might be interested in. As a result all English they see is dealt with in a similar manner (putting it into Japanese).

The dictionary has been their constant companion, and one of the least productive habits is indiscriminately looking up letter combinations they do not recall a Japanese equivalent for, without first trying to guess about what kind of word or what meaning it could have.

Altogether this approach makes reading a laborious task that gives little satisfaction and excitement at reading in the new language. Further, there is apparently no sense of learning from the texts: what is read in this manner is language study only and information in the

text is not considered relevant to the students' lives.

Outline and Object of the course

The classes meet twice a week for 45 minutes for perhaps 25 weeks during the period between April and December, and there are about 50 students in a class. The students have been assigned at random from the incoming class, so there is some difference in abilities, although this does not seem to present difficulties.

The object I set for the year's study is to enable students to learn to survey a text, read through it, and form an opinion about the things it tells about, and to become able to skip over parts of the texts that they, the reader, consider of less importance. At the same time there is stress on inculcating the habit of guessing about unknown words without undue reliance on the dictionary, except where it is necessary to obtain an accurate and detailed understanding of the contents.

The first lesson

In the first lesson I distribute a handout that details what we are going to do in the course and what we are going to read. There is no textbook assigned for the first semester, and I rely on handouts and the SRA stories detailed in the next section.

The material on the handouts are meant to be read in class and it is generally centered on a task that will require students to hand in something, or in some other way show that the tasks have been completed.

The handout also specifies the requirements for passing the course: handing in all homework; reading the SRA stories; having

fewer than ten absences (the class will meet about forty five or fifty times); and taking part in the two end of term tests.

I stress that there are no deadlines for the homework, but that it is usually possible to complete the assignments during the classtime, and that they should try not to fall too far behind. The students are told that the homework of a semester must be completed at the end of each semester.

The frequent homework involves the teacher in some correction, and this and other aspects of record keeping will be discussed at the end of the paper.

In this first lesson they are also given a picture and a short (unrelated) text, and their job is to draw a picture to represent the text, and write a text to represent the picture. I prepare four or six sets of these so students have to stretch their necks to see what others do.

The purpose of the assignment is to have the students do something they may never have done before. So far they have put English text into Japanese and have possibly never experienced trying to represent a text with a picture.

Using the SRA reading laboratory

The SRA stories are introduced in the first or second week, first with a careful detailing of the techniques suggested for use with the stories. These techniques go under the name SQ3R and the S (survey: looking at the pictures and key features of the story) is simply understood. The Q stands for question, and asks the students to pose questions about the story they are about to read to help them focus on the topic of the story. The three Rs are read, review and recite. Reading comes after surveying and questioning, and practically, reviewing takes place when they sort out the questions that they have answered different from the suggested answers. The recite step is skipped, it could be helpful with a small class, but with 50 students it

would be difficult.

Doing these things may not seem very difficult, but as mentioned above, the students have approached English texts by putting them into Japanese without reflection on the topic or contents, and often without any particular wish or intent to find out what the story is about.

Having to look at the text (the Survey step) is a new experience. When introducing the survey elements I present students with stories that, in addition to text, have pictures and other features to help the story along. The students are told not to read the texts, but based on what they observe, without (before) reading, to tell me their ideas of what the main points of the stories are.

The stories used for the introduction are not the SRA stories but stories with more pictures, titles, and subtitles. The purpose is to present texts where surveying is clearly advantageous in grasping the story. It is hoped that the students will understand that looking at the stories gives a good understanding of a story, and can help them to get an idea of what it is about and how interesting it is.

This leads on to the Question step, which puzzles students, and I have found it necessary to insist on visible proof of this having been attempted well into the course (see below). To achieve it students are asked to write out questions they formulate about a story. For the introduction, I ask for questions about different aspects of the story, but later with the SRA stories proper I demand only a single question penned on the record card.

Introducing the SQ3R, students are then presented with three or more stories (not SRA stories). At the start of the lesson we go through what I want them to do with one of the stories. We agree on a topic and formulate questions arising from the title, subtitles, pictures, and other features that may attract their attention. Then, they themselves do this for one of the remaining stories. With two or three stories provided, they have opportunity to talk to neighbors, and most

manage to hand their response in at the end of the 45 minutes.

The next lesson presents the SRA stories proper. Each student is given (in future lessons they have to select it themselves) a story and before starting to read, they are told to Survey and formulate a Question about a specific aspect of the story (the first time usually the picture), and write this question on their report card. Then read the story and do the comprehension questions at the end of the story.

They are told that they have to finish within the 45 minutes and it seems difficult this first time. There is no time to use dictionaries to any great extent, but the scores on the comprehension questions are not so poor as the easiest stories have been used this first time.

Ensuring that students really do the readings and keep doing them has been a problem. A careful check of each student's work is time consuming, but without the appearance of such, some of the students start to only go through the motions in the second semester. To show that careful checking of all work takes place, I distribute data cards (B6 size) that they are required to use for record keeping. They affix a table of the SRA stories, where they mark which stories they have read. The rest of the card is then taken up with the questions they have thought up, and their answers to the comprehension questions and the scores. I collect the data cards at the end of each lesson, and check them regularly, before handing them out before the next SRA story.

This reading of the first SRA story sets the pattern for the use of the stories. When students arrive in the classroom I have put the stories and the record cards out, they pick up a story at their level and survey and read it. On the blackboard I specify how the survey question is to be made, and how many of the comprehension questions they should do. About thirty minutes into the lesson I start to distribute the answer keys, first to the students who are furthest along in the work. At the end of the lesson they hand back the stories,

answer keys, and record cards.

The SRA stories are divided into levels and I give the students instructions for when they are allowed to advance to the next (more interesting) level. The criterion I use is two or fewer wrong answers on the comprehension questions. There are seven to ten such questions at the end of each story, and students seem greatly pleased that they don't have to get a perfect score before progressing. The result of this policy is that most students reach the three or four highest levels at the end of the year.

As the year progresses I start not to insist that they print a question about the story on their report cards, but students are still visibly surveying the story before getting into the reading. The process also gets quicker, and as the year progresses I require them to do more of the comprehension questions.

The students seem to like the SRA stories. Initially they have trouble with not having to answer all questions right before going on to the next level, and in the beginning I check the record cards to make sure that they do advance when they can.

Dealing with unknown words

Also early in the first semester the students are introduced to exercises attempting to wean them away from their dictionaries, to help them realize that they often know a lot about the words they are not sure of.

I bring a handout that asks them to determine what the different words in a sentence mean, stand for, or indicate in its particular sentence, like in:

Annie likes strawberry ice cream a lot.

The students have to provide answers to questions of the form:

What/Who does (a word from the sentence) stand for here?

To the question "Who does 'Annie' stand for here?" I want them to answer "A girl who likes strawberry ice cream (a lot)," and for the other words:

What does 'likes' stand for?

What/How Annie thinks about strawberry ice cream

What does 'strawberry' stand for?

The kind of ice cream Annie likes.

What does 'ice cream' stand for?

What Annie likes.

What does 'a lot' stand for?

How she likes strawberry ice cream.

This is difficult the first few times. The students have trouble understanding the utility and purpose of this kind of exercise. They seem uneasy because dictionary meanings do not help in providing the answer, and the answer is not the dictionary meaning.

The purpose of this exercise is to get students to guess about words they don't really know and have them learn that just an understanding of what the word signifies often helps to establish meanings. The first exercises use known words, but in the next step we go on to words that are probably unknown to the students.

Another confusing feature is the absence of a single correct response. Each word can be represented by a number of short statements and I accept all that more or less fit.

After the brief introduction they are asked to do half a dozen simple sentences like this, and then introduced to short texts containing words they probably don't know. They are asked to read the texts and describe what these difficult words are doing in the story, as above, without using their dictionary, and they soon seem to catch on.

This kind of exercise is a permanent feature of the lessons, and when new texts are introduced, students are instructed to specify

what unknown words 'do' for a set number of words.

I ask for a substantial number of words, and during the lesson, the time available for the exercises is too short to make dictionary use possible. However when students have trouble finishing within class time, they may do the unfinished parts at home.

When they get used to this exercise, I ask them to also provide alternatives to the unknown words. The students are told to look at their statement of what the word does, and use this to think of (usually) three alternatives to the word in question. For 'strawberry' above the alternatives may be other ice cream flavors. For 'ice cream' some other things that Annie may like, related to ice cream and strawberries. Alternatives to 'a lot 'could be other degrees of liking, and 'likes' may be replaced with some other word expressing an opinion of strawberry ice cream. Alternatives to Annie would be the name of someone who likes strawberry ice cream.

The alternatives should make sense in terms of the statement of what the word is doing, and need not be related to the meaning of the word in the original sentence. This exercise should be used sparingly as the students soon fall back on their dictionaries. It may be successfully completed once or twice, or at intervals.

I have also asked what words added to sentences would tell about - not what they would be - but a meta-statement of what they would stand for in general. Here students are asked what a word in front of a specific content word in a text could possibly tell about. In the example above, responses could be something like:

before *likes* - something to describe how she likes it,

before *strawberry* - perhaps how or what the strawberries are, or what she likes to do to the strawberries, and

before *lot* - a word to qualify lot.

Concrete suggestions are possible, but stopping at the meta-statement keeps students from thinking of specific words, and so obviates the need to look in dictionaries. During these exercises

students often discuss the responses with their neighbors (who are working on different sentences or texts).

The aim of this kind of exercise is to get students to stop to automatically reach for their dictionary when an apparently unknown word appears. Rather, it is hoped that they will look at the word, determine what it is doing in the sentence and with this information decide if it is necessary to obtain a more detailed knowledge of its meaning. Indirect evidence seems to show that students do start to react in this manner.

Picking out information

A further activity in the first semester is to pick out information from texts, and try to understand how it is connected with the larger world outside the classroom.

This is comfortably done with texts about people or food, but any topic that is not too far removed from the students experience and contains a wealth of details would be a candidate for this kind of exercise.

Here, students get a text with details of peoples lives, or of the nutritional contents of different food items, or similar. They are also provided with a handout that details what they have to do. It seems important to provide this assignment in printed form to ensure comprehension.

The information that the students have to find may involve aspects of the text that is dealt with in some degree of detail. First I ask for information that requires surveying ala the SRA stories and have students pose questions of a general nature about the texts (the Q in SQ3R). Then, when they have an idea of the story, have them read and evaluate the read. This may be effected by providing similar information about people or details of foods or nutrition where this is taken up.

In the final step they are asked to provide information that is not in the text, about other people or the nutritional value of food items not mentioned. The aim is to get them to read 'between the lines' and apply their own knowledge of the topic together with the specific information in the text.

Reading longer texts

Towards the end of the first semester, students are considered to have developed the necessary reading skills to tackle longer texts, and I have had them read a novel about a high school graduate who gets a job looking after an old lady. It has generally met with the students approval, but is probably not the best that can be provided at this point.

The purpose of using a longer text is to get away from the many prints that are difficult to keep track of and which do not provide a clear focus for the reading activities. A better solution would be to use a large number of shorter texts of varied content, perhaps twenty, eight to ten page long stories.

The drawback with the longer novel is that when the contents are seen to be boring, motivation will drop and interest flag. Non-fiction would also be preferable as the students are less acquainted with this kind of text, it would be similar to the SRA stories, and provide variety. However, despite the drawbacks I have found the novel superior to a continuing flow of prints.

The reading of the novel proceeds at about ten pages a week, first the students are asked to carefully read through a small number of pages and note difficult words as above, and then survey the remaining part of the week's section more extensively. I usually divide a segment into half a dozen parts and ask students to read one carefully and survey some of the rest to get the gist. The section they read is determined in some manner based on their student number, as this

avoids having neighbors working on the same parts.

This assignment is supplemented with very general questions regarding the happenings in their section of the novel. The following week the same section is again assigned, and now a student will get a different part, and has to determine details of the happenings. Finally they are asked to tell what they think of what is going on, and how it connects to the earlier parts.

I generally try to ask questions that do not have set answers like: What is something that is surprising, natural, sad, happy, boring, etc. in your section; 'How would you do if -', and then provide conditions related to the contents, or other similar questions.

The purpose of this is to get the students to read the parts well enough to form an opinion and impression of what is going on. Further I frequently ask for titles and other organizing information.

At the end of the second semester, about 50 pages are left and these are then used for the final assignment that I expect them to do at home during the new-year holidays. This assignment reviews the various things we have done in class and requires the students to have some grasp of all of the 50 pages as well as the other parts of the story.

Housekeeping

Correcting the weekly 50 sets of exercises need not be unduly laborious. I accept all answers that somehow show that the student has comprehended the assignment, and read the text. I do not insist on well formed or complete sentences but may suggest more common phrasings where meanings are not clear. There is no need to read through all answers, the volume is such that it invites spot checking, and where a spot check shows that a student has understood the assignment I do not look at all responses. When I see original or otherwise interesting ideas in the homework I commend the student

when handing back the homework. During class, students are working on their assignments, and most of my time is spent handing back homework, individually, with comments to each student.

When parts of an assignment is not doable for a student I encourage them to clearly state that it cannot be done, and why. At times there are no incomprehensible words in a passage, or a student has nothing to say to a question. It seems difficult to get students to use this facility, however.

Finally

Early in the year the students are quite nervous about most of the happenings in class. As time goes by they gain more confidence and display few problems with the very varied assignments.

When introducing new material I always stress the rationale for asking them to do what they have to do, to the point of explaining it in Japanese if that seems advantageous.

Some of the homework handed in is not correct. Students may have misunderstood the instructions, and I generally accept also such submissions when they show that the student has tried to deal with the text, and where the misunderstanding still makes the assignment meaningful. When however such misunderstandings result in meaningless responses I will often ask for the assignment to be redone.

Generally the student contributions are well thought out and while not exactly like I expected, they are reasonable and show that effort has been made, such homework is accepted.